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RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6997
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1453
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000111

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL ELITES LINING UP BEHIND THIRD TERM AND
BOUTEFLIKA'S "LEGACY"

REF: ALGIERS 0027

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: During the week of January 24, a series of high-profile political leaders came out publicly in support of constitutional change to allow President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a third term. They included key members of the presidential coalition, the speaker of parliament and even an opposition leader who had previously not only opposed the third term but also announced his own candidacy for president in the 2009 elections. Speaker of Parliament Abdelaziz Ziari told MPs on January 28 that a special session of parliament would be the ideal means to handle the third term initiative (reftel); one opposition parliamentarian told us afterward that the way was now clear in the absence of any opposition from Western countries. Contacts also tell us that behind all of this political machination lies a tacit agreement among political and military leaders to accommodate Bouteflika's well-known preoccupation with his legacy by allowing him the honor of dying in office. End Summary.

RULING COALITION DELIBERATES, THEN ACQUIESCES

¶2. (C) January 26 newspaper headlines featured a declaration of support for a third term from National Democratic Rally (RND) leader and former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, a key member of the three-party ruling "presidential" coalition. Previously, Ouyahia had stated that the RND felt the process should not be rushed, and that it needed time to discuss the matter internally. On January 27 the front page of Arabic-language daily Echourouk el-Youmi featured Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP) leader Abujerra Soltani emphatically stating that the MSP would not support the constitutional amendment process except "in the context of wider reform." Reuters correspondent Lamine Cheikhi explained to us on January 28 that Ouyahia's delayed support was in itself not surprising, as the appearance of deliberation was important to the credibility of the drive towards the third term. The MSP, according to Cheikhi, was also well on its way to officially supporting the third term, but that its deliberation process was longer since it had to consult its internal consultative body, the Majlis ach-Choura.

OPPOSITION WEAKENED, DEMORALIZED

13. (C) Meanwhile, opposition Algerian National Front (FNA) leader Moussa Touati formally stated his support for the third-term drive, an about-face from the clear opposition he expressed almost immediately after the November 29 local elections. At that time, Touati was the first politician formally to announce his candidacy in the 2009 presidential elections. Touati told us on January 28 that "we at the FNA have the interest of Algeria at heart." If the third mandate and the revision of the constitution are what the people want, he said, "we must go ahead." Laughing at his previous comments to us in early November that "ten years in power is enough," he repeated that "Algeria's interest once again should be the priority of all Algerians."

14. (C) Hamid Lounaouci, national secretary of the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) responsible for institutional relations, told us on January 29 that the third term is essentially a smokescreen and does not matter a great deal to the political class. Lounaouci conceded that the RCD is unable to stop the process from taking place, but said that all of the fuss about a third term is "distracting people from what is really going on behind the scenes." Lounaouci pointed to the recent visit of French president Nicolas Sarkozy, which was almost exclusively focused on business and investment. Sarkozy had stated publicly that he supported Bouteflika, Lounaouci asserted, to keep the Islamists at bay "in order not to have the Taliban take over Algeria." Lounaouci sighed that Algeria's wealth was now all that mattered to countries such as the U.S. and France, since "nobody said anything" to oppose the drive towards a third term.

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15. (C) Lounaouci also told us of Ziari's closing speech to the assembled parliamentarians at the end of the fall legislative session. According to the press, Ziari's presented the parliament as the appropriate arena for approving Bouteflika's candidacy for a third term, essentially clearing the way for the process to begin when Bouteflika formally consults the Constitutional Council (reftel). In fact, Lounaouci claimed, Ziari did not speak directly of the third mandate but instead spoke of the need for "a new document that will strengthen institutions" and allow the people to choose their representatives "without limits." The principle of term limits, Ziari told the MPs, had been "imposed by Westerners" and actually limited democracy rather than strengthening it.

COMMENT: KING-MAKING BEHIND THE SCENES?

16. (C) Lounaouci and Cheikhi both told us that the acquiescence of Ouyahia was significant, as he is far more influential in the government than a political puppet like Touati. Lounaouci believed that the RND deliberations not only addressed the Bouteflika third term, but the question of an eventual successor to the president. Echoing what many of our contacts have told us, Cheikhi said that Bouteflika was fixated on his legacy and was determined to die in office to ensure his place in the history of modern Algeria. Cheikhi voiced the "Algerian reality" that all political parties, opposition or not, have solid contacts with the army to varying degrees, since it is the army that permits and guarantees their existence. Lounaouci and Cheikhi both said that, given Ouyahia's ties to the military dating back to his tenure as prime minister, it appeared that during the deliberation stage agreement had been reached within the leadership to grant Bouteflika's wish. At the same time, they surmised, agreement was reached to identify a successor the army could promptly support upon Bouteflika's death in order to ensure continued stability. Thus, Cheikhi told us, the third-term drive was now a fait accompli. "The only question now," he said, "is the president's health and how long he will live."

